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ABSTRACT

The educational "excellence" movement is hindered by inconsistencies between goals and action and by difficulties in translating national and state goals into local policy; nonetheless, progress has occurred. Examples of "voodoo excellence," in which proposed policies will likely work against their stated objectives, are widespread. While advocating excellence for all students, states raise standards beyond the reach of many. Likewise, broad humanistic studies are advocated, yet in practice schools increasingly emphasize rote learning. States are lengthening time in school without considering the use of time; they propose to make teaching a more attractive profession but use inadequate, demeaning, and divisive means to do so. Promises of equity contrast with increasing gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and endorsements of community involvement contrast with increasing centralization. Moreover, certain "anomalies" arise as state programs filter down to the grassroots. These include endemic complacency in school districts, reform proposals that stress structural and programmatic change but overlook instructional change, and widely varying viewpoints. Despite these obstacles, the public's awareness of and confidence in education have increased, as have aspirations for and expectations of children; finally, belief in the importance of thorough student assessment has spread, and the social status of teaching has risen. (MCG)

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GRASSROOTS EXCELLENCE: PROBLEMS AND PROGRESS

Observations

Prepared for the Urban Superintendents and
Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific

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GRASSROOTS EXCELLENCE

Introduction

The burgeoning "excellence" movement in American education, a call for reforms and improvements embracing the entire system, began with a period of exhortation: widely-publicized national reports which pinpointed the soft spots in schools and schooling and demanded that specific corrective actions be taken.

The period of exhortation was followed by a period of mandates--specific requirements imposed primarily by state-level education authorities--calculated to bring about the desired educational changes.

As the impetus of the "excellence" theme has moved from the national-exhortation stage, through the state-mandate stage, attention is coming to be focused on programs: what is actually happening in local school districts, at specific school sites, and in individual classrooms--the grassroots level.

It would be a pleasant task merely to report on the many good things that are going on in American education as a result of the renewed concern with excellence, but such an approach would fail to put the

status of grassroots excellence into perspective. There is a real renaissance, a new sense of power and purpose, in schools today, but an understanding of what is happening to make these changes possible requires an examination of several related issues.

This examination can be divided into three parts: first, a consideration of the fundamental policy problems that the "excellence" movement presents; next, an analysis of the peculiar anomalies which are developing as high-minded state policy works itself down into the realities of day-by-day school operation; and finally, a look at some of the encouraging steps being made toward a higher level of excellence in education at the grassroots.

I. VOODO EXCELLENCE

Without becoming embroiled in either political history or economic theory, it may be helpful to borrow a phrase popularized in the 1980 presidential primary race, when one candidate called the program for national economic recovery being promulgated by his then-opponent "voodoo economics." By that phrase, the critic meant that the proposed program promised to bring about economic growth and stability by the magic of taking actions to achieve desired ends, actions which themselves might be rationally expected to yield exactly the opposite results--i.e., increasing government revenues by lowering taxes.

Perhaps today we are faced with a similar contradiction in our rather breathless pursuit of excellence: to achieve a desired educational goal,

we do things which might be rationally expected to have an effect quite the opposite of what we really wanted in the first place--hence the term, "voodoo excellence."

Examples of this backwards approach are not hard to come by. In order to accomplish a worthy educational objective, we are sometimes urged by an eager public--and often similarly inclined by our own sense of urgency--to do just the opposite of what might be reasonably expected to help us reach our intended goal.

A. Excellence Is for Everyone

One of the firm tenets of the school improvement movement is that excellence is for everyone. Echoing the forthright call in the first of the major "excellence" reports, each succeeding commission, committee, or task force has emphasized that excellence is for everybody. It most definitely is <u>not</u> an elitist concept: every student must and can be expected to achieve, at his or her own level and own pace, a measurable and respectable degree of excellence. Yet, we strive toward this admirable goal by a tightening-down and toughening-up process which seems to preclude any reasonable expectation of reaching our goal of excellence for everyone. As performance standards are raised, course requirements are increased, and graduation minimums are escalated, are we not in danger of squeezing out of the excellence race a very substantial number of students who, even now, just can't make the grade?

B. Emphasize a Broad Range of Learning

All of the calls for excellence in education stress the importance of taking students beyond mere rote-and-recall learning into the realm of the "higher thought processes." Of equal importance in the published studies and reports is the continued insistence that academic, cognitive, and intellectual studies and learning are not alone enough. Also important are the humanistic, the affective, the artistic, the aesthetic--these crucial facets of life must not be neglected as we heighten our academic expectations and raise our intellectual standards.

Fine--but what is actually happening in many schools as the race towards excellence seems to be proceeding at such an encouraging and rewarding pace? There is good reason to believe, from even a cursory examination of new standards and published goals for American education, that fact-filled teaching and learning still dominate the average classroom. Perhaps this content emphasis is even more pronounced than in the pre-excellence past, since now the concern is stronger than before that students "do well on the tests"--and the tests are often keyed to rather pedestrian, even pedantic, recall of factual information.

Aesthetic and artistic knowledge and experience are likewise getting squeezed out of the school lives of many students. As course and graduation requirements are increased, many students no longer have slots in their daily schedules for electives, art and music programs, or for a variety of other "extracurricular" activities including athletics. If they have the hours in their schedules, there is still a reluctance to

take the time away from the "important" subjects. Compounding the students' problems with fitting the affective-domain programs into a crowded schedule is the school districts' growing budgetary stress: extra courses in mathematics, science, and foreign language--as common examples--take fiscal priority over art, music, speech and drama, journalism and even the less popular athletic programs.

C. Increase Learning Time

Almost uniformly, those who offer suggestions for pursuing excellence in education insist that there must be more school time devoted to actual learning, a suggestion so eminently reasonable that almost no one concerned with education--teacher, administrator, parent, legislator--could possibly disagree.

Yet, the popular response in many states to this call for increased learning time has actually been to increase increase time in the classrooms, particularly by lengthening the school day and/or year, which is not the same thing at all. (One state official in the South recently announced with great pride that his state had made a giant stride toward statewide educational excellence by increasing the length of the school year by three whole days!)

Nothing wrong, of course, with more time in school--it's doubtless a good start toward a desired end. But one has a gnawing suspicion that relatively little attention has been given to better use of time. More time spent doing the same old things (dull) in the same old way (dull) is perhaps a classic-example of voodoo excellence.

D. Increase Attractiveness of Teaching As a Career

"We've just got to have better teachers if we're to have better education!" No pronouncement about the road to excellence in education has received more enthusiastic public acclaim than the call for better teachers, a goal calculated to be achieved largely by increasing the psychological and financial rewards for teaching, getting rid of the "bad apples," and--most important of all--rewarding the outstandingly meritorious teachers.

Good stuff; let's get with it. Thus, the popular reaction, especially among those most accutely tuned to the polictical reverberations of the improve-teaching proposals: governors, and legislators--persons who are not only sincerely interested in improving education, but who are keenly aware of how it will play in Peoria.

Therefore, some of the strongest tides of movement toward better teaching by insisting on better teachers have focused on only two aspects of the proposed reforms—get rid of the bad (competency exams!) and reward the good (merit pay!). There has been also, of course, some very serious soul-searching in the profession about instituting better practices in recruitment, admission to teacher-preparation programs, improvement of the programs themselves, certification and recertification requirements--the whole works. But the popular emphasis has been on competency exams and merit pay.

Much has been said and written--possibly too much--about the strengths and weaknesses of these two most popular proposals for making teaching both more attractive and more effective, so the conflicting viewpoints need not be elaborated upon here. The point being made here is simple: both of these teacher-oriented reforms in the name of educational excellence are producing quite unlooked for results. One--competency exams--is seen by many teachers, rightly or wrongly, as unfair and demeaning and even meaningless, since the tests have really very little to do with classroom effectiveness. The other--merit pay--puts emphasis not on collaborative efforts directed toward self-improvement, but is in its effect competative, divisive, breeding professional suspicion and feeding professional paranoia. Voodoo excellence?

E. Advancing Equity

Reform efforts in contemporary American education have been largely--and quite appropriately--directed toward improving students' academic and intellectual attainments. Recognizing that pursuit of these goals of excellence may put a strain on some students, who are disadvantaged by one circumstance or another beyond their control, reformers have almost unanimously proclaimed that equity must not be threatened or compromised by excellence. They often pose the rhetorical question, "Can we have both excellence and equity?", always answering their own query with a resounding <u>yes</u>! (One study report tried to tie

the two concepts together at the outset by entitling their approach "Project Equality")!

Despite the enthusiastic and optimistic rhetoric, however, much of the "excellence" thrust seems to be creating wider gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups than had previously existed. Students handicapped by home background, social and economic conditions, or past/present racial discrimination, barely keeping up academically with the pack when competition was not so keen nor expectations and standards so rigorous, now often find themselves falling farther behind. Generally conservative social trends exacerbate the equity gap that the excellence movement has opened.

Fred Hechinger has recently quoted Greg Anrig, President of the Educational Testing Service, as reporting that today's conservative mood has muted the voices "for justice and equity," particularly in higher education, adding his own comment that "Legitimate efforts to reward merit appear to be drifting toward a new elitism that favors the rich and neglects the poor."

Quality and equality, it appears, are still at loggerheads.

F. Make Schools More Responsive to Community Goals and Needs

Nearly all of the pleas and pronouncements concerning educational excellence contain a strong endorsement of increased community involvement with establishing specific school programs that reflect community aspirations and meet community needs.

Commendable as this emphasis is as policy, actual practice often is at great variance with announced intentions. Increasingly, prescriptions from centralized authority take precedence over community and school-site planning and parental involvement. States, particularly through legislative enactment, promulgate educational policies and set standards on a statewide basis through mandated teacher-testing programs, mandated graduation standards, mandated assessment programs, and the like.

State boards parallel legislative mandates with ones of their own: accreditation standards, course-content standards; graduation standards; school-time standards; discipline standards.

As Professor Lee Shulman of Stanford recently pointed out to the Council of Chief State School Officers, standards quickly result in standardization. Is this a good route to excellence?

II. ANOMALIES

The first section of this paper has examined several specific aspects of the "excellence" movement in which the high expectations of the statewide thrust may have been disappointing at the grassroots level in education because achievement of what was intended has been attempted by methods and programs which seem to produce results quite the opposite to those desired.

Additional problems have arisen with actually achieving excellence because of certain anomalies which have arisen as state-level programs filter down to the grassroots.

A. Endemic Complacency

In many instances, it appears that the strong verbal support with which the recommendations of the "excellence" reports have been greeted at the local level among educators and laymen alike, and the almost missionary zeal with which reforms have been initiated, really masks a fundamental complacency about how well schools are already doing. This complacency takes two forms.

The first is the often-expressed conviction that the particular school district didn't really need to be pushed into reform by popular demands or state-level mandates (whether from the governor's office, the legislature, or the state board of education.) "We were already doing it," is a reply frequently heard in response to questions raised regarding what impact the "excellence" movement has had at the local level.

Explanation is then given that the local district had already expanded course requirements for graduation; had toughened-up on grading; had introduced more math and science and foreign language; had installed a new discipline code; had cut down on classtime interruptions; had a committee working on a career ladder plan. All of these steps are probably commendable, and it may well be true that in many districts actions--or serious thinking about the problem--was under way, but there persists nevertheless the overall impression that the "excellence" movement wasn't believed to have been really needed and hasn't made a whole lot of difference.

This impression of a rather fundamental complacency is heightened when one inquires about the most significant changes which have actually been accomplished at the local level. A typical--and surprisingly common--reply is the self-satisfied boast that although the time devoted to athletics has remained unchanged, pep rallies are no longer held on school time. Big deal.

Or, the significant changes noted may quite often include the boast that another "year" of (ray) English has been added as a graduation requirement, and additional standardized testing has been instituted. One is tempted to ask whether the added English course is more of the same, and whether the tests newly required still test primarily rote learnings, but the respondents seem so satisfied with little changes of small significances that it seems ungentlemanly to disturb their complacency.

B. Overlooking Instructional Changes

Much has been reported in the "excellence" literature about structural and programmatic changes in education, but disappointingly little is being said (either in the written reports or in converstations with school leaders) about instructional change as such.

It is almost as though the effective schooling research and the excellent programs which grew out of this research have been, if not forgotten, placed (in Fred Hechinger's phrase)--on the back burner--with the control turned to "simmer." For example, goals and priorities are

not so much determined at the local--much less the school-site--level as at the state or statehouse level. The curriculum is not a "determined" one as the term came to be used in the effective-schooling movement, but one determined by mandate-from-above. "Direct instruction" means now not so much the teacher's active involvement in a structured learning situation, but textbook-centered and test-driven teaching. "Time on task" means not so much "students working at an appropriate level of difficulty and experiencing success," as one of the experts in time-allocation put it not long ago, but rather it seems to mean keeping the kids' noses to the grindstone--and no pep rallies on school time!

The paragraph above is perhaps over-sharp in its judgement, but a modest measure of hyperbole seems necessary to underscore the importance of the point: instructional improvement is, in many cases, being overlooked in favor of more popular, more understandable, more dramatic changes.

C. Anomalies of Perception

A nagging problem with trying to translate educational excellence from the national-report level and the state-mandate level down to the grassroots level is that various observers may all be looking at the same problem and the same proposed solutions, but seeing far different things from different viewpoints.

Many legislators and other political figures, for example, are particularly interested in only a limited spectrum of educational

issues: What's it going to cost? Will it get rid of the bad teachers? How will it make us look on the state-by-state comparisons?

Many parents look at proposed changes in curriculum, graduation requirements, and testing programs from the perfectly-understandable viewpoint of how the change would affect their own children. Broad questions of educational philosophy and social policy are not their immediate interest.

Many teachers feel that the "excellence" movement (the aims of which they unreservedly applaud) has turned out to involve programs and proposals which they take to be demeaning and/or threatening: competency testing, merit pay, judging teacher success by student test scores, to name a few of the less palatable suggestions which have been widely circulated.

Finally, state-level and grassroots viewpoints on the state of excellence in the schools, and on who's responsible for the failures or who may take credit for the successes, disclose sharp differences of opinion. Local district administrators are quick to complain that they are being pushed too hard, too fast by those people in the state Capitol Building; the state-level education officials, on the other hand, have been known to mutter unkind comments about local-district foot-dragging.

Despite these anomalies, progress is unmistakable, as the following brief section will show.

III. GRASSROOTS GROWTH

Since the focus of this paper has been on issue analysis, rather than on presenting workable policy options, the optimistic spirit which can justifiably pervade any discussion of the progress of the "excellence" movement may have appeared to be missing. But even the briefest of listings of what is rather typically happening at the grassroots or local-district level as schools and communities pursue excellence is tremendously encouraging.

There is so much variation in the status of education reform across the nation, state-to-state and district-to-district, that generalizations can be misleading or even dangerous. Some states and districts are way ahead of the pack, some are way behind, and the majority are about holding their own. Nevertheless, reports and observations of current practice, and conversations with chief state school officers and local district administrators, lead inescapably to the cheerful conclusion that the excellence/reform movement in American education is indeed making a positive difference at the grassroots level. A number of advances in educational programs and practices support this conclusion.

A. Heightened Public Awareness and Increased Public Confidence

To say that public education is again back on the national agenda as a high-priority item may be platitidious, but it is nevertheless a true and striking phenomenon, vastly encouraging after education had suffered

through a couple of decades of apparent public unconcern.

The general public--and most importantly the state-level political decision makers who can draw attention to education issues and propose solutions--show a heightened interest in public education. They see it as crucial to our national interest and as a pivotal factor in sustaining our national economy.

Not only has public interest been aroused and sustained, but the public seems to believe (despite all of the sharp criticisms of the American education system contained in the multitude of reform reports) that the system is fundamentally sound, basically on the right track.

B. Higher Aspirations and Increased Expectations

People do want better education for their children and for all children, and they do increasingly expect that the schools both can and will provide it. Hence the public interest in higher academic standards stiffened graduation requirements, more working and less goofing off. They want better teachers and better teaching and--somewhat hesitantly--are willing to pay at least part of the price. Some of the proposals for changes coming out of these higher aspirations and increased expectations may be extreme and even, in the view of some educators, just plain wrong-headed, but the public and professional interest in school improvement must be applauded.

C. More Thorough Assessment

Whatever reservations one may have about the current push for more frequent and more demanding testing of students, the growing belief that adequate assessment and evaluation is of crucial importance to successful pursuit of educational reform efforts has been generally beneficial. Progress in education can be measured only if accurate data on present successes and failures are at hand, and changes can be intelligently made and judged only if their effects can be objectively measured.

D. Improved Status of Teaching

There seems to be little doubt that the image of teaching as a profession is improving. Although there is still a very wide gap between image and reality, both the public and the profession are showing a more optimistic mood about the importance of teachers and teaching.

The steps towards making teaching a more rewarding occupation, one attracting more able candidates, one capable of policing its own ranks, one willing to establish means for encouraging and rewarding merit, and one much better compensated in both psychological and material ways--these steps will continue to be the source of much dispute.

The disputes on means are likely to continue unabated, but the fact remains that the status and rewards of teaching, having reached an unacceptable nadir, are on the ascendency. There is scarcely a state which is not in the process of altering historic patterns of teacher

education and certification, working dilligently to improve teacher salaries, and trying to devise some workable plan for differentiation of assignments and consequent compensation scales so that a teaching career can really become an upward-reaching ladder.

IN CONCLUSION

The imbalance of space devoted in this paper to problems and anomalies in contrast to that given to more positive reports reflects no cynicism or pessimism. It simply reflects the inescapable realities of the difficulties inherent in translating national exhortations and state mandates into grassroot operations at an acceptable level of excellence.

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